

Why “Yes” Is More Powerful Than “No”

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Getting up the nerve to ask your boss for a raise or promotion can feel excruciating. Although we might dread the prospect of asking the boss—or even a colleague—for a favor, a large body of evidence suggests that we’re actually much better at influencing others than we might imagine.

“Potential requesters stress about imposing on others, feel self-conscious about revealing their shortcomings, and fear the worst—rejection,” Cornell University psychological scientist Vanessa Bohns writes in a new article in [*Current Directions in Psychological Science*](#). “However, research by my colleagues and me suggests that this latter concern is often unfounded.”

Across a decade of conducting experiments, Bohns and colleagues have asked study participants to make requests of more than 14,000 strangers: Whether it’s asking to borrow a cell phone or soliciting a charitable donation, their research reveals that people are far too pessimistic about their own powers of persuasion.

It can be nerve-racking to be the one asking for a favor, but what we may not realize is that it can be just as flustering to be on the receiving end of a request. According to Bohns the strength of social norms makes it much harder to say “no” to a request than it is to just say “yes.”

For example, imagine a situation in which your cell phone is dead and you need to make a call. Your only option is to approach random strangers on the street and ask to borrow their phone. How many people would you need to approach before someone agreed to loan you their phone?

When Bohns and colleagues asked participants to do this for a study, most subjects predicted they would need to ask at least 10 people in order to find three who would let them borrow a phone. But, in reality, participants’ requests were far more successful than they had estimated: Instead of the anticipated 10 people, they were able to reach their goal after asking just six strangers.

“In other words, approximately one out of every two people they approached agreed to loan our participants their phones; participants had overestimated the number of people they would need to ask by more than 60%,” Bohns writes. “In essence, by refusing a request, one risks offending one’s interaction partner—a violation of intrinsic social norms that would ultimately embarrass both parties. As a result, many people agree to things—even things they would prefer not to do—simply to avoid the considerable discomfort of saying ‘no.’”

In another study, participants asked strangers to vandalize a library book by writing the word “pickle” in pen on one of the pages (don’t worry, it wasn’t an actual library book). Although many of the requestees voiced discomfort or reluctance about the request, “more than 64% agreed to vandalize the book—a far cry from requesters’ prediction of 28%.”

Even asking for something very small, like asking for a seat on the subway, can feel intensely uncomfortable, and people use this outsized emotional information to gauge—often incorrectly—how imposing or costly their request is. This bias appears to be extremely robust, persisting in many countries (including the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, and China), in urban and suburban settings, and across a large variety of requests.

However, adding a cash incentive into the equation seems to help people more accurately gauge the scale of their request. In one study, participants offered strangers a small incentive (either \$1 or a candy bar) in exchange for vandalizing a library book, or simply asked them to deface the book with no incentive.

The incentives didn’t make a difference to the strangers, as they were just as likely to deface a library book for \$1 as they were for free. However, offering compensation helped participants feel much more comfortable and confident about approaching strangers for a favor. They were also much more accurate about predicting the rate of compliance.

“The research reviewed here offers a rare glimpse into the influencer’s view of the influence process,” Bohns concludes. “My colleagues and I hope researchers will continue to explore this meaningful perspective and identify not only the factors that make us more or less influential, but also the factors that make us more or less aware of our influence over others.”

Reference

Bohns, V. K. (2016). (Mis)Understanding our influence over others: A review of the underestimation-of-compliance effect. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 25(2), 119-123. doi: 10.1177/0963721415628011